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‘Like a Parrot Screaming in It’s Cage’

Activism and Empowerment in Nepal’s Bhutanese Refugee Community

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Fall 2006

Dedication

This research is dedicated to the promise of a durable solution for the Bhutanese refugee community and to those working toward this solution.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the following people for their support during my research:
- Grady Walker, for serving as my advisor and introducing me to the issue of Bhutanese refugees;
- Kamal and Pingala Dhital, for their generous gifts of time and friendship – you are both continual sources of inspiration to me;
- Roz Evans, for her assistance in all areas of my work, and without whose help this paper would be much shorter;
- Muna, for providing me with a quote for my title and a friend on the long bus ride from Jhapa to Kathmandu;
- The residents of Beldangi II camp, sector I, for their assistance in my research and their patience with my Nepali

And to everyone else who provided assistance during my month of research: Rupa, Sushma, Hari, Mani, Nandhi, Nandhu, Arun, Manoj, Gurash, Ritu – I appreciated your help, friendship, and daal bhaat more than I can say. Thank you for everything.

Table of Contents

Introduction

Every Friday for several hours in the afternoon, motorists traveling across the India-Nepal border via the Mechi Bridge encounter a unique obstacle. A small group of men and women gather in the middle of the Mechi Bridge and sit to the side of road facing India. They sit behind a photograph of Gandhi and display a banner that reads: "Satyagraha for Repatriation and Reconciliation." To most passers-by, this group is simply a traffic obstacle.

These protestors are refugees from several of the Bhutanese refugee camps in southern Nepal's Jhapa and Morang districts. Sponsored by the Human Rights Organization of Bhutan (HUROB), various members of the refugee community have been coming to the Mechi Bridge protest as a peaceful call for repatriation since December 17th, 2005. Said one man participating in the protest, "Our message has been taken all over the world – Nepal, Bhutan, Geneva – and still no one is listening."[1]

It certainly must feel this way for the majority of the Bhutanese refugees in Nepal. Bhutanese refugees began arriving in Nepal in the early 1990s, and for the last 16 years over 100,000 refugees have been living in camps waiting for a resolution that has not yet come. The basic needs of refugees are provided for by several international and governmental agencies. However, in a protracted situation such as this one, the concept of "needs" extends beyond simply the things needed to maintain life.

In becoming a refugee, a person not only loses their home, they also lose the ability to autonomously make decisions about their lives. Bhutanese refugees are

[1] Personal interview with a protestor at the Mechi Bridge, November 24, 2006.

no exception; although external agencies provide material assistance to the residents of the camps, many have thus far failed to adequately provide mechanisms for participation by the beneficiaries of their aid. While many of the agencies in the camps, at least in theory, incorporate refugee voices in the operation of their programs, in practice refugee participation is precluded through a number of mechanisms. As Tania Kaiser notes in her essay "Participation and Beneficiary-Based Approaches to Humanitarian Aid Programmes," aid organizations have begun to recognize the importance of using beneficiary input as a method of assessing aid programs, but many have not yet succeeded in making this ideal a reality.[2] Alastair Hallam elaborates on this in "Evaluating Humanitarian Assistance Programmes in Complex Emergencies"

> Humanitarian assistance is essentially a 'top down' process. Humanitarian agencies are often poor at consulting or involving members of the affected population and beneficiaries of their assistance. Consequently, there can be considerable discrepancy between the agency's perception of its performance and the perceptions of the affected population and beneficiaries…Interviews with a sample of the affected population should be a mandatory part of any humanitarian assistance evaluation. [3]

For Bhutanese refugees, agency is inhibited at the level of the aid organizations at work in the camps as well as from within the community itself. Several Bhutanese organizations have gained a platform from which to project

[2] Kaiser, Tania. "Participation and Beneficiary-Based Approaches to Humanitarian Aid Programmes." New Issues in Refugee Research, February 2002. Kaiser mentions that many aid programs have focused largely on material output as a measure of success. While many have recognized the need to move towards more recipient-based involvement in aid provision, however, Kaiser also notes that the desire to move towards increased involvement has "yet to become common practice."

[3] Hallam, Alistair, 1998, Evaluating Humanitarian Assistance Programmes in Complex Emergencies, RRN Good Practice Review, Overseas Development Institute, London.

their views, and it is often the views of these organizations that are promoted as the so-called "voice of the refugees." In this way, the most marginalized members of the refugee community are again left with few means to participate and make decisions about their lives and their needs.

This paper will look at empowerment in the Bhutanese refugee community from a number of angles. First of all, it will examine issues of representation. Refugees are often represented to media sources and agencies by Bhutanese political leaders who do not always represent the variety of needs and views present in the 100,000-person plus refugee community. Second, this paper will discuss camp management and the ways in which participation is encouraged and discouraged by agencies involved in providing for refugees. The refugee community is far from silent on issues of participation and representation; thus this paper will look at several examples of Bhutanese activism that have been successful in defining and fulfilling needs within the community.

Providing mechanisms for agency and participation is important in all scenarios, and refugees are no exception to this rule. The need for empowerment, however, is especially pressing in the Bhutanese community. Recent offers of third-country resettlement have suggested that a resolution to the refugee issue could be coming in the not-too-distant future. It is important to ensure that refugees in the camps have means from which to participate in decisions about their future. For sixteen years, the Bhutanese community has been limited in its ability to individually define their needs and act accordingly. With the possible

light of a resolution at the end of the long tunnel, it is time to take a close look at how to help refugees to regain control of their lives.

Research Methodology

In order to conduct research on this topic, I spent time in both Kathmandu and in Jhapa. In Kathmandu, most research conducted involved formal interviews at a variety of agencies. I also met formally with several refugee organizations that have offices in Kathmandu. Because the Bhutanese refugee issue is currently a topic of much conversation, much of my research involved looking at media sources for new information and opinions on the refugee population. To gain a perspective on how the issue has been discussed in the past, I looked at old issues of *Himal* magazine, which covered the issue extensively, especially in the early years.

In Jhapa, I visited five of the seven refugee camps – The Beldangi camps, Khudunabari, and Goldhap. Most of my time in the camps was spent in Beldangi II, and much of my research consisted of informal interviews. I conducted two focus groups, one with men from Beldangi II and one with women from Beldangi II (extension). A significant amount of time was also spent simply observing – I was able to sit in on several classes in the Beldangi I and Goldhap schools and made trips to visit various facilities, such as the Asian Medical Doctor's Association (AMDA) hospital. I also conducted formal interviews with several Bhutanese organizations based in Jhapa.

Due to the limited amount of official literary work on Bhutanese refugees, much of the historical and background information I obtained is from Michael Hutt's Unbecoming Citizens. I also was able to obtain a number of proposals for funding, position papers, and local publications from within the refugee community. From these documents, I was able to gain an idea of how these organizations work and what kinds of services they provide to the refugee community.

Several significant obstacles were encountered in the course of my research. First of all, although many camp residents speak a fair amount of English, a large number do not. Due to ease of communication, many of my interviews were conducted in English (although several were translated from Nepali) and for this reason my research is biased towards the English-speaking population of the camps.

A second obstacle in conducting my research was the length of time. Although I was aware that this would be a limitation when I began my research, it quickly became apparent to me once I arrived in the camps that this is a huge, complex, and sensitive issue that requires lots of time to understand. After several incidents and interviews, it became clear that political questions and conversations about resettlement were not open topics. I also encountered a lot of resistance from the Nepali government representative at one camp. In situations where conversations topic were more limited, I relied heavily on observation.

It is impossible to go into a refugee situation and not become, at least to some extent, emotionally involved with the subjects of research. By the end of

my trip to Jhapa, I had made strong social ties to a number of refugees, almost all of whom were involved in a certain organization. For this reason, much of my research was conducted through the lens of this organization's platform.

For many of my informant, speaking about the past and recalling old memories seemed to be almost therapeutic. I went to the camps with a loose plan to look at needs communication, but in many ways my research was shaped by my informants. Due to the volatility of the camp situation, names of all refugees in non-official positions were changed to protect their anonymity.

Bhutanese History and the Eviction of Lhotshampas

Accounts of Bhutanese history, and especially the history of the south, are few and far between. Like the historical accounts of many controversial situations, "facts" are difficult to find. This is first and foremost because history is subjective, and perceptions of one event differ from person to person. More importantly, history is an important tool. Historical events can be twisted to fit the needs of the teller and convert the listener to the same viewpoint. For this reason, there is a considerable difference in the retellings of Bhutanese history: children in the camp schools, for instance, hear a different version of Bhutanese history than is put forth by the Royal Government of Bhutan. In summarizing Bhutanese history and the events leading up to the eviction of the southern Bhutanese, attempts will be made to incorporate a number of different versions of the events that took place.

Bhutan was unified in the year 1616 AD by Ngawang Namgyal, a Tibetan lama who established Bhutan as a Buddhist theocracy.[4] Sometimes described as the Bhutanese analog of Nepal's Prithvi Narayan Shah[5], Namgyal gave himself the title of *Shabdrung* and set up a system of spiritual and temporal rule that was to continue through reincarnation. This system of governance was to continue until 1907, when the British aided Bhutan in the establishment of a hereditary monarch.[6]

Sometime during the period between the unification of Bhutan by the Shabdrung and the establishment of the monarchy, the first Nepali-speaking settlers made their way from Nepal into the southern part of Bhutan. The dates of the arrival of the earliest settlers are disputed by different sources.

School children in the camps learn that Nepali settlement in the south occurred in four phases. During the first phase, Nepali artisans were commissioned by the Shabdrung to aid in the building of 108 *dzongs*, or monasteries, which would serve as fortresses to protect the country against invasion from Tibet. During the second phase of settlement, children learn that 42 Nepali families were sent by the Nepali king as a protecting force in Bhutan. In 1640, the third phase of Nepali settlement occurred when the Shabdrung took carpenters back to Bhutan after a visit to the Malla kings. Finally, students learn that the final phase of settlement occurred with the large scale settlement of Nepali speakers into the southern hills of Bhutan. The rapid growth of the

[4] Hutt (2003:17)
[5] Prithvi Narayan Shah was a Gorkha king who is generally credited with the unification of Nepal.
[6] Dixit, Kanak Mani. "The Dragon Bites It's Tail." *Himal*, July/August 1992.

ethnically Nepali population appeared as a threat to the less significant population of the northern Bhutanese (Ngalongs).[7]

In his book Unbecoming Citizens, one of the few literary works available on Bhutanese refugees, author Michael Hutt acknowledges possible claims to Nepali settlement in southern Bhutan in the seventeenth century. However, based on information that is available regarding Nepali migration to the Sikkim area, as well as reports from several British expeditions into Bhutan, Hutt makes the observation that

> Although one cannot rule out the possibility that small numbers of people belonging to the ethnic groups that are now considered members of the 'Nepali' constituency might have dwelled in or visited Bhutan at this time [before the Duars war of 1964-5]…if it is true that eastward migration from Nepal into Sikkim began during the 1870s, then it is unlikely that migration to Bhutan predated it. Before 1865 there was probably not a Nepali community in southern Bhutan.[8]

Either way, by the 1930s, it appears that a number of Bhutan's southern districts were populated heavily by Nepalis. Except for some seasonal visitors to the region, the area was mostly uninhabited – a British visitor to the region noted that this was due to the movement of Bhutanese who had previously lived in the area into the northern hills.[9]

The settlement of a significant Nepali population introduced a new ethnic group into Bhutan. Other groups include the Sharchops, who live mostly in eastern Bhutan, and the Ngalongs, who live to the northwest. Other smaller ethnic groups live in Bhutan, however these three are the most significant in terms of

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[7] Observation of social studies class in Goldhap camp, November 28th, 2006. After finishing a discussion of the four phases of Nepali settlement in southern Bhutan, the teacher concluded by saying, "Now we are homeless and jobless, in the refugee status."
[8] Hutt (2003:39)
[9] Hutt (2003:59)

population. Ethnically Nepali settlers to Bhutan became known as *Lhotshampas*, a word which refers to the southern borderland where most Nepalis live.[10] Although ethnically a minority, the Ngalongs are politically dominant and Dzongkha, the Ngalong language, has been the official language of Bhutan since 1961.[11]

In the early years of Nepali settlement in the south, there appears to have been little interaction between the central government of Bhutan and the Lhotshampa population. While the management of the south was monitored from a distant by the national government, until the 1960s the management of the south seems to have occurred mainly in the form of annual collection of taxes and the maintenance of law and order at the village level.[12]

It was not until the ascension of Bhutan's third hereditary monarch, Jigme Dorji Wangchuck in 1952, that the central government of Bhutan took much notice of the Lhotshampa population. Dorji jump-started Bhutan's development: during his reign, a number of development projects were undertaken in Bhutan, including the construction of a road from India to Thimpu and the formation of the National Assembly. Additionally, he enacted the 1958 Nationality Law of Bhutan, which set the ground rules for citizenship.[13]

The liberal attitude towards Lhotshampas and the push to integrate them into mainstream Bhutanese society continued into the 1970s. Adjusted

[10] Hutt (2003:4)
[11] Rizal (2004:3)
[12] Hutt (2003:66)
[13] Citizenship was granted according to the following criteria: 1. Children of Bhutanese national were granted citizenship no matter where they were born; 2.After 10 years of residence in Bhutan, if one had reached the age of majority, one could petition for citizenship so long as they had either conducted 5 years of service to the government or owned agricultural land; Hutt (2003:134)

citizenship acts passed in 1977 and 1985 changed the conditions for citizenship, mandating new requirements (such as some knowledge of the Dzongkha language). A marriage act passed in 1980 affected those married to non-Bhutanese. A series of censuses were conducted from 1969 onward. While the first census may have been related to Bhutan's plans to apply for membership to the United Nations, subsequent censuses were conducted to ensure that Bhutan's residents were bona fide taxpayers. A census performed in 1988, however, had a less innocent role.

> The census operations that were conducted annually in most southern districts from 1988 onward quickly became a tool not only for the eviction of illegal immigrants but also for the dispossession and banishment of various categories of Lhotshampa citizens.[14]

The turning point came in 1989 when the Royal Government of Bhutan began to enforce a code of laws among the general public known as the *Driglam Namzha*. This code of laws and a set of other regulation (such as the mandated wearing of the national dress in 1989) were designed as part of a drive for the 'preservation and promotion of a national identity.'[15] As was noted in a 1992 issue of *Himal*, Bhutan's image as a culturally and ecologically pure country was threatened by Nepali presence. Tourist brochures define "Bhutan" as synonymous with "Drukpa."[16] Jigme Singye Wangchuck called Drukpas an endangered species, and used the example of Sikkim, where ethnic Nepalis had become the majority and gained political power.

[14] Hutt (2003:159)
[15] Hutt (2003:164)
[16] While the term Drukpa is often used to refer to the Buddhist Bhutanese, other sources claim that it refers to anyone living in 'Druk Yul' (Bhutan).

Additional measures were taken to limit the perceived threat of Nepali culture. These included the establishment of Dzongkha as the national language, the required wearing on the national dress (*goa* for men and *kira* for women), the removal of Nepali from the curriculum in southern Bhutanese schools, and the "Bhutanization of buildings," which defined acceptable styles and materials to be used in construction.[17]

Lhotshampas began to raise concerns about the new policies in the south after the 1988 census, and in April of that year, two members of the Royal Advisory Council including Tek Nath Rizal presented a petition to the king on behalf of their constituents. The king, after reviewing the petition, put Rizal in jail for three days, after which point he was released. Rizal fled to Nepal and became what Hutt describes as a 'rallying point for disaffected Lhotshampas.'[18]

Political protests staged by the Bhutan Political Party, the Student Union of Bhutan, and the People's Forum for Human Rights increased into 1990. The term *Ngolop* was coined in 1989 and began to be used in reference to those participating in the protests. Many refugees in the camps remember participating in the protests as children.

> We were told not to go to school on a particular day. I had a banner that said "Long live the king!" because I had heard that people from other districts had used more aggressive slogans and were shot…my father was leading the demonstration because he had been told to do so by the BPP. We crossed a bridge to go to the district office. We went there and bowed and chanted slogans. My teachers were there and were looking at me with anger.[19]

[17] Hutt (2003: 162 -192)
[18] Hutt (2003:200)
[19] Personal interview with Ranjali R., from Beldangi II camp, November 20, 2006.

A then-teenaged refugee, Kavi R. recalls participating in protests as well. Although she was too young to understand the political situation, she remembers being threatened by leaders of the political protests. She recalls leaders of the protests telling Lhotshampas that if they did not participate in the protests, 'six inches will be reduced.'[20]

Kavi further recalls the first protest she attended, where people were chanting "Bhutan people's party!" Kavi remembers being confused at the time. She thought the chanters were saying "Bhutan peepa patti!" At the protest, people took of the goa and kira and burned them. Leaders of the protest appealed to the district officer, and the protest dispersed. In the next days, facilities were shut down. Kavi, too young to understand what was going on, was happy to have a holiday from school.[21]

After the protest, Ranjali remembers the events leading up to her family's departure from Bhutan.

> Then the army started arresting people who were involved [in the protests]. My father's name was on the list so he left. In the village and old man was arrested at midnight, and we lived like this. We spent nights in the jungle because the army came to the village and moved around without asking. Anti-nationals used to say they were going to blast the police camp, so it was better for us to sleep in the jungle. We were scared of both [the army and the anti-nationals].
>
> My older brother went to India and we didn't know where he was. I and my older brother went to India to look for my father and my mother found us there. The next day our village was raided and after that we were not able to go back to Bhutan. [22]

[20] Several refugees in the camps mentioned this threat from the Lhotshampa political leaders. People said that this meant that those who refused to participate in protests would be beheaded.
[21] Personal interview with Kavi R., from Beldangi I camp. November 19, 2006.
[22] Ibid.

The experiences of refugees in the camps are widely varied. Some people were forcibly evicted, while others left due to escalating and increasingly tense situations in the south. Some left because so many other southerners had left. Ranjali's experience provides an interesting view of a community that was, as Ranjali later said, 'caught in a valley' between the Bhutanese forces and the Lhotshampa political leaders.

Citizens Become Refugees

The first refugees arrived in Nepal in 1990. Purna M. was in this first group of refugees and remembers the trip over the border. He says that he spent a week in Kakarvitta with his family. After a week, they were told to move to the Mai River. As refugees continued to come over the border, the Mai River settlement became what the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) would call a 'humanitarian emergency.'[23] Purna remembers staying there for one year. It was crowded, and he remembers that with no assistance and no medication, many people died. His family survived by begging in the local markets.[24]

More refugees arrived from Bhutan. In 1991, with the invitation of the Nepali government, UNHCR stepped in to provide emergency relief along with the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP). With the government's assistance, UNHCR began constructing camps. Refugees continued to arrive in decreasing numbers through 1995. At present, southern Nepal houses 7 camps:

[23] Personal interview with Nini Gurung, UNHCR External Relations Officer. December 5, 2006.
[24] Personal interview with Purna M., from Beldangi II camp. November 20, 2006.

six in Jhapa and one in Morang.[25] Refugees were registered as they came across the border and placed in camps accordingly. Hutt reports that at the end of January 2000, the camps housed 97,750 refugees.[26]

In the early years, Bhutanese refugees were a subject of a fair amount of debate, at least on a local level. In a 1992 *Himal* article entitled " Human Rights in Bhutan," author Clarence Dias stated that "we need to contribute to and help facilitate immediate an effective relief and rehabilitation of the Bhutanese refugees in our countries." The better part of the July/August 1992 issue of *Himal* was dedicated to articles about Bhutanese history and the eviction of Lhotshampas.

However, as Bhutan entered the early rounds of bilateral talks with Nepal, it seemed that refugees might be stuck where they were for some time. S.B. Subba, the head of the Human Rights Organization of Bhutan (HUROB), says that Nepal failed to do its homework in preparation for the talks. This fact, combined with the constantly changing delegates, lead to the first 15 rounds of failed bilateral talks.

Equally tentative pushes for a solution were seen with the 2001 start to the joint verification process of Nepal and Bhutan. Originally proposed in 1993, the verification process attempted to categorize refugees into one of four categories:

1. Bona fide Bhutanese citizens who had been forcibly evicted
2. Bhutanese who had voluntarily migrated
3. Non-Bhutanese people

[25] The Jhapa camps are Timai, Goldhap, Khudunabari, Beldangi I, Beldangi II, and Beldangi II (extension). Pathri, also called Sanischare, is located in Morang. The town of Damak is central to the Beldangi camps and Pathri, and the town of Birtamod is central to Timai, Goldhap, and Khudunabari. See Appendix B for a map showing the location of the camps in Jhapa and Morang.
[26] Hutt (2003:258)

4. Bhutanese who had committed criminal acts[27]

Khudunabari was the first camp and last camp to be verified, after the process was halted by refugees protesting the process. When the results of the verification came out, it transpired that only 2.5% of the residents of Khudunabari camp were classified as bona fide Bhutanese.[28]

A Refugee Identity

In their eviction from Bhutan, Lhotshampas became refugees, and with that designation have been relegated to an identity in limbo. While considered to be ethnically Nepali, few feel Nepali at heart. Ranjali, who lives in Beldangi II, says she feels Bhutanese, not Nepali. Although she wants to go back to the place that she feels is home, she does not feel that repatriation is a viable option at this time. She thinks that in terms of having a life, resettlement is the best option, although she says that if resettled in the US, she would continue to work for repatriation.

For many people in the camps, identity is connected with citizenship. In lieu of citizenship, many camp residents identify very strongly as Bhutanese refugees. In schools, children grow up having their identity as Bhutan's displaced citizens emphasized again and again. In a social studies class in a Beldangi I school, teacher Ram S. opened class by asking, "Which is our country?"

All of the children replied in unison, "Bhutan!"

[27] Hutt (2003:259)
[28] Hutt (2005:39)

Ram looked around the classroom before saying, "Do not forget our homeland."[29]

It is unlikely that any student would. Some schools have maps of Nepal, but every school, and most individual classrooms have a map of Bhutan. Of ten observed social studies classes, all but two were on the topic of Bhutan – everything from how Bhutan was named to a discussion of Bhutan's hereditary monarchs. Students gather outside the school each morning to sing a prayer to the current king of Bhutan. The headmaster of the primary school in Goldhap camp described the primary education system as "education for repatriation."[30] For classes 1-6, students follow the New Approach to Primary Education (NAPE), Bhutan's primary education system.

With such a strong emphasis on Bhutanese identity in the refugee community, it is perhaps not surprising that the most vocal refugee voices are those advocating for repatriation. These "refugee leaders," however, do not necessarily represent all of the voices of the refugee community.

Refugees and Representation

On November 5th, 2006 *The Rising Nepal* ran an article titled, "Refugee leaders not happy with US settlement offer." The article goes on to state that "Bhutanese refugee leaders Sunday said that the third country resettlement had

[29] Observed social studies class in Beldangi I school, November 22, 2006.
[30] Personal interview with Goldhap camp primary school headmaster, November 28, 2006.

brought division among the refugees and the refugees were actually in favor of being repatriated to their home country."[31]

Who are these so-called refugee leaders? The most well-known and vocal of these is Tek Nath Rizal, the chairman of the Bhutanese Refugee Representative Repatriation Committee (BRRRC) and the head of the Bhutanese Movement Steering Committee (BMSC), a group of Bhutanese political organizations. Rizal was promoted early in the movement following his release from prison in Bhutan and since that time has claimed to be the voice of the Bhutanese refugee community.

In an interview with Santosh D., a refugee registered in Beldangi II, it became clear that what the media calls 'refugee leaders' are not representing the whole refugee population. Santosh, who used to work closely with Rizal, stated that the refugee leaders referenced in many media sources are the BRRRC and the BMSC – both of which are headed by Rizal and serve as mouthpieces for his repatriation-only platform. Santosh claims that when the BRRRC was first formed in 2000 with the goal of creating a united platform for refugee human rights and social organizations. Although "repatriation" was mentioned in the organization's name, the organization was interested in exploring all options for a solution.

Meanwhile, Rizal was traveling around speaking on behalf of refugees – in Geneva, in the United States, and in Kathmandu. With less and less time spent in the camps, Santosh explained that Rizal became out of touch with refugees.

[31] Staff Reporter. "Refugee Leaders not happy with US resettlement offer." *The Rising Nepal*, November 6 2006.

Things came to a head when, following disagreements with a leader of a Bhutanese human rights organization, Rizal reacted by limiting the platform of the BRRRC to repatriation only. [32]

During a group interview with several men from various sectors of Beldangi II, several people mentioned discontent with the political representation of the leaders. The men, who were working to organize a rally for third country resettlement, had a variety of views on the subject. One man was of the opinion that the political parties claiming to represent refugee were not working because the people were not represented, and the platforms being promoted were not in the interests of the refugees themselves. Another said that the parties were producing no results. As organizations that claim to represent refugees, he felt that political leader were out of touch, as many didn't live in the camps.[33]

A group of women in Beldangi II (ext.) held similar views about the ineffectiveness of the political parties. Anita T. described the refugee leaders as 'stupid.' Anita had worked previously in the Camp Management Committee, or CMC, a group of elected refugees that aid in supervision and management of the camps. She shared the views of several other camp residents who blamed both the Bhutanese government and the Lhotshampa political protestors for the eviction. When asked how well the political parties were working, Anita said, "The refugee leaders are not giving us a chance. They brought us from Bhutan and now they won't take us back." [34]

[32] Personal interview with Santosh D., November 14, 2006.
[33] Group interview with 15 men from Beldangi II camp, November 25 2006.
[34] Group interview with seven women from Beldangi II (ext.), November 25, 2006.

Concerns about the issues of representation of refugees in the camps is an issue that has recently been gaining more attention in the camps. The ability of groups that oppose the representation of Bhutanese political leader, however, depends upon the ability of refugees to participate more actively in providing an alternate representation that more fully incorporates refugee views. In order to assess the ability of people to represent themselves, it is necessary to examine the ways in which refugee participation is provided for and limited in camp management.

Camp Management, Refugee Aid Organizations, and Refugee Participation

In order to understand refugee participation in the camps, it is necessary to understand the camp management system. Management of Nepal's refugee camps takes place on three levels: at the local level, with the Bhutanese management team; at the national level, with the Nepali government; and finally at the international level, with the UNHCR and its implementing partners.

The intricacies of the camp management system were described by Manoj Rai,[35] camp secretary of Khudunabari camp. Manoj has been camp secretary for the past year and described his role as being a liaison between refugees in the camp and the agencies working for them. Elections for the position of camps secretary are held on a yearly basis, and any registered refugee without a criminal record can participate. Four representatives from each unit go on to participate in

[35] Personal interview with Manoj Rai, camp secretary of Khudunabari. November 23, 2006.

a second round of elections.[36] From the pool of candidates, a camp secretary is elected, as well as representatives for the Camp Management Committee (CMC).

The CMC is responsible for resolving disputes and coordinating refugee affairs. The Committee is divided into six compartments to deal with specific issues as the need arises. These include an administrative branch to deal with office management; a gender focal point for women's issues; a Community Watch Team for camp security; a counseling department to settle disputes; a social department; and finally, the Infrastructure Social Committee (ISSC), which in involved in camp maintenance and issues of infrastructure, such as hut repair.

Aside form the CMC, each unit has two representatives, also elected yearly. Problems in the camps are taken to the unit representatives for resolution. If this fails, the camp secretary is informed of the situation, and the case is forwarded to the appropriate compartment of the CMC.

For cases that are complicated, the Refugee Coordination Unit (RCU) is notified. The RCU is the Nepal government's representation in the camps and is comprised of a Camp Supervisor and one assistant. The RCU is an appendage of the Kathmandu-based National Unit for the Coordination of Refugee Affairs (NUCRA). NUCRA is based out of the Home Ministry in the Nepali government and is responsible for all camp management decisions.[37]

It is also the Nepali government that is responsible for inviting the UNHCR to aid in management of the refugee population. While all final

[36] Each camp is divided into sectors, which are further divided into units. Khudunabari, for example, has 7 sectors and 24 units.

[37] The NUCRA office is also responsible for regulating visits to the camp. Application stating the intent of a visit must be submitted to the NUCRA office, which then issues a permission letter for visiting the camps.

decisions on refugee affairs must be approved by the government, most day-to-day needs of refugees are provided for by UNHCR. UNHCR provides services through implementing partners. In the Bhutanese refugee camps, the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) provides sanitation, and infrastructure assistance and oversees distribution of material assistance (such as food and briquettes for cooking.) Caritas-Nepal provides education services in the camps. The Asian Medical Doctor's Association, or AMDA, provides health care services. This includes primary health care services for refugee at the camp level, as well as a hospital based out of Damak for more serious cases. The Nepal Bar Association provides legal assistance and counseling, and an organization called Vajra has been involved in providing solar energy in the camps. A UNHCR field assistant is involved in the day-to-day monitoring of each camp.[38]

UNHCR has also set up a number of smaller programs in the camps. These include the Bhutanese Refugee Women's Forum (BRWF), an organization that works primarily on generating income for women in the camps. Recently, the UNHCR also sponsored the construction of youth-friendly centers in the camps to deal with issues in the younger population. These centers were founded by UNHCR in order to provide a center for activities for young adults that have left formal schooling and are perceived to be susceptible to recruiting by Maoists.[39]

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[38] Personal interview with Nini Gurung, External Relations Officer at the UNHCR Kathmandu office. December 5, 2006.

[39] Ibid. Several refugees interviewed believed that Maoism among youth was primarily a result of boredom and frustration. Crystal Kaplan, who heads the refugee portfolio at the US embassy, also believes that for young, energetic, idealistic refugees with no job prospects, Maoism is an attractive option.

Many of the agencies involved in the camps at least in theory provide mechanisms for refugee participation in the running of their programs. Nini Gurung, an external relations assistant at the UNHCR Kathmandu office, listed a number of venues through which UNHCR took refugee input into account in making decisions about their programs. Ms. Gurung stated that focus groups were conducted in the camps annually to receive input from beneficiaries on how to adjust their programs for the upcoming year.[40]

Caritas as well has mechanisms to involve refugee input into the delivery of services in the camp. In an interview with Caritas' Kathmandu-based executive secretary, Mukti Subedi described the process by which new curricula are developed for students in the camps. Coordinators of the program assess the curriculum three times yearly based on feedback from refugees.[41] Gopal S. is the headmaster of a Khudunabari school and has been working there for 14 years. He said that Caritas visited each school every two weeks and that headmasters from all schools meet monthly in the Damak-based Caritas office.[42]

Each agency that is active in the camp, including the UNHCR, has at least one staff member that works during business hours in the camp offices. For UNHCR, this person is a field assistant, for LWF, the Camp Management Official (CMO). AMDA is represented in the camps by a Health Program Officer (HPO) and a Monitoring Official (MO) represents the WFP. All of these representatives provide day-to-day monitoring of the camp situation to report back to their

[40] Personal interview with Nini Gurung, External Relations Officer at the UNHCR Kathmandu office. December 5, 2006.
[41] Personal Interview with Mukti Subedi, Executive Secretary of Caritas-Nepal.
[42] Personal interview with Gopal S., headmaster of Khudunabari school, November 23rd, 2006.

respective agencies. They also provide a direct line to the agencies for refugees who are looking to voice concerns or ask questions.

This mess of acronyms and agencies in theory provides a number of important mechanisms through which refugees should be able to provide their input to agencies in the camps. However, many refugees seemed to feel that the agencies working in the camps were distant from and out of touch with refugees living in the camps. Additionally, few considered refugee-based activism outside of the sphere of the agencies as an alternative means of raising their voices.

Why is there such a discrepancy between what agencies claim to provide and what refugees experience? And why have so few refugees taken a proactive role as local activists? For some refugees, one major obstacle is a simple lack of knowledge about their opportunities for participation. In an interview conducted by a Human Rights Watch representative with a group of women from Beldangi II, one woman said that she had just recently made her first-ever visit to the RCU. When asked why she had never been before, the woman replied that she simply hadn't known that it was an option.[43]

Even for those who do know about ways to get involved in the camps, not all feel sufficiently confident in their abilities and knowledge to participate. This particular issue seemed to be more of a factor for women than for men. In a group interview with seven women in Beldangi II (extension), six said they were not involved in any organizations outside their homes. When asked why they were not involved all of the women said that they didn't feel qualified to

[43] Group interview conducted by Human Rights Watch representative in Beldangi II camp. November 17th 2006.

participate. Amrita S. elaborated on this thought by explaining that she couldn't go because she was illiterate and uneducated. The women felt that no one was representing their voice, and further, that they were being neglected by the RCU and UNHCR. Despite this, none felt that the remedy was to take action themselves.[44]

A Human Rights Watch Report from 2003 looking at the status of women in the camps noted a similar lack of confidence even among women in positions of power. They observed that "many women in leadership positions emphasized the need for greater training so they could perform their jobs more effectively." In 2003, it was mandated that women make up half of the CMC. While the goal behind this requirement was undoubtedly well-intentioned, empowerment requires more than numerical growth. In other words, placing more women in leadership positions without providing additional education or training does not necessarily increase women's agency.

This leads to another more practical concern that limits involvement by refugees. Many refugees lack the skills necessary to participate in a meaningful way in taking charge of their situation. Ideally, refugees would be able to work with agencies to voice their concerns, and feel able to advocate outside of the agencies for other unmet needs. Activism, however, requires a unique set of skills that aren't taught in refugee camps. Rajani experiences this issue when she first went to Kathmandu to start an organization

[44] Jyoti M., a member of the Bhutanese Refugee Women's Forum (and the only member of the group to be involved in an organization) said that she used to go to the UNHCR when issues arose, but she stopped going because "they don't listen."

advocating for a broader solution with Indira M., a woman registered in Pathri camp. Rajani describes her first efforts in activism as naïve:

> When we [Indira and I] first came to Kathmandu, we didn't know anything. If we wanted to meet with someone, we would sit outside the office and cry until someone let us in.[45]

Although they lacked practical skills, Indira and Rajani had other attributes that made activism from their end easier. Indira had previously served as a research assistant to a foreign researcher who had come to the camp some years earlier. She says that, had it not been for the skills and exposure she had gained through her position, she would not have come to Kathmandu. Likewise, Rajani's husband used to work closely with Tek Nath Rizal and several Bhutanese activist organizations. She explained that many political leaders and activists would come to her house to discuss with her husband, and while she was serving tea, she learned about their activities and became interested in getting personally involved. These connections were important in her decision to begin working proactively for a solution.[46]

While many people in the camps have connections to important community figures, agencies, and resources to serve as a basis for participatory action, many others do not. It is these more marginalized members of an already marginalized community that require the most attention when trying to increase participation. Empowerment programs should focus on providing ways to involve those who have not had an opportunity to speak out on issue. While in many ways this seems obvious,

[45] Personal interview with Rajani R., Beldangi II camp. November 28, 2006.
[46] Ibid.

often "empowerment" results simply in the increased participation of those who already feel confident in providing input. Camp secretary Manoj Rai described the role of the camp secretary as important in supporting people in the camps who are "innocent" and have no voice.[47]

These cases emphasize several areas where forums for refugee participation are lacking. First of all, if agencies are serious about wanting to involve refugees in the operation of their programs, action must be taken to inform refugees about their options for participating in agency programs. Additionally, it is important for agencies to engage in meaningful dialogue with refugees and work with them as partners. While it is unrealistic to expect agencies to respond to all of the needs of community the size of the Bhutanese refugee community, agencies should be willing to make an effort to involve refugees in the process of making decisions about the running of their programs, and not just on a once-yearly basis. Both agencies and community based activists should focus on involving people from the camps that do not generally participate in decision-making.

Additional Challenges to Refugee Participation

A number of additional factors have come into play in preventing the participation of refugees aside from the representational and institutional mechanisms that exclude some refugees.

One of the most pressing concerns in the camps is the increased presence of Bhutanese Maoists. While some refugees interviewed laughed off the threat,

[47] Personal interview with Manoj Rai, Khudunabari camp. November 23, 2006.

for others their presence has been a serious cause for concern. In the second part of a series of articles on Bhutanese refugees, *The Kathmandu Post* ran a piece entitled "Youth gravitate toward arms option":

> There are growing evidences that refugees frustrated with the Druk regime's refusal to repatriate them are gravitating toward the arms option. Maoist's success in Nepal and growing Maoist insurgency in India has bolstered their confidence. Ignored ad infinitum by their king, some of the 106,000 Bhutanese refugees…have begun to organize themselves for armed struggle as an alternative to establish democracy and end ethnic discrimination at home. [48]

Maoists in the camps have been vocal in their support of repatriation as the only acceptable resolution to the refugee situation. This support has manifested itself in the form of threats to those in favor of third country resettlement. Indeed, on November 15th, 2006, *The Kathmandu Post* reported death threats that had been made to two men by "an underground militant outfit" in the refugee community.[49] Both men are camp secretaries and are involved in a group that is involved in advocacy for "durable solutions" to the refugee issue. While their platform has included speaking in favor or resettlement, the group's advocacy works on solutions for those interested in local integration and repatriation as well.

These two men are unfortunately not the only refugees who have been threatened by Maoists. Rajani and Indira were involved in starting up the first refugee organization to speak out in favor of resettlement as a possible solution to the refugee situation. Both women received death threats for promoting this platform. Rajani has since begun working on women's empowerment through a larger organization, and is still advocating for durable solutions. She says,

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[48] Pokharel, Tilak P. "Youths gravitate toward arms option." *The Kathmandu Post;*, November 11, 2006.
[49] Post Report. "Death threat to refugee leaders." *The Kathmandu Post*, November 15 2006.

however, that she does not feel secure in the camps. Hut walls are constructed of woven, flimsy bamboo walls, and thus provide little protection[50]. Additionally, although each camp used to have police posts, they were removed in 2002 following a bomb explosion that killed one of the policemen. For now, the only security system in the camp is provided by the UNHCR trained Community Watch Team, a group of refugees responsible for monitoring the camp after dark.[51]

In Khudunabari camp, Maoists have an even stronger presence, as Prithi M. discovered first hand. After asking questions about resettlement during a meeting of a women's group, a large number of Maoists surrounded Prithi's hut and threatened to burn it down. Luckily, the Khudunabari CMC heard about the incident and was able to convince the group to leave her alone. Incredibly, Prithi has continued to speak out in favor of resettlement.

Prithi's husband is involved in one of the camp's implementing agencies, and this may contribute to her confidence. But for ordinary camp residents, especially those with few connections to people in positions of power, participating in meaningful and open discussion about long term solutions could easily be precluded by the threat from the Maoists.[52]

Intimidation may play some role in limiting refugee agency. Additionally, however, a host of unmet needs in the day-to-day lives of refugees provide a

[50] Personal interview with Rajani R, November 25th 2006.
[51] However, this group has little capacity for meaningful action. Although the CWT was able to identify the young man who had threatened the camp secretaries, his only punishment was an overnight imprisonment in a locked hut.
[52] Meeting of a women's organization, observed November 29th, 2006 in Damak. Prithi described what had happened to her earlier and the conversation was translated into English by Rajani.

situation that is not conducive to promoting refugee participation. Once such need is a source of income. Refugees in the camp are not legally allowed to work for pay. Many refugees work for Caritas as teachers and for this work they are paid an incentive of Rs. 1000 per month. Others have found illegal work outside the camps, as teachers in private schools, as day laborers, and in other jobs that provide an income, albeit it an unstable one. Some women in the camps spin wool or weave *topis* for a very small amount of money. Kavi R.'s grandmother spins wool that is brought in from Kathmandu. One kilogram of wool takes about two days to spin and pays Rs. 85.[53]

In theory, an external income source shouldn't be necessary as many of the material needs of refugees are provided for by agencies in the camps. In reality, the assistance provided is not sufficient. For example, rations distributed by the WFP provide little in the way of vegetables. Pujan T., a school teacher at a Beldangi II (extension) school, says that the majority of the incentive that she earns as a teacher goes to buy vegetables. Additionally, education used to be fully funded up to class twelve. Due to recent budge reductions, however, schooling is now only funded to class 10. While Caritas provides some partial scholarships for further study, they do not cover the full tuition required to complete the final two years of schooling beyond class ten. Further, students wishing to study at university are responsible for finding their own funding.

In protracted refugee situations, needs extend beyond the material items needed simply to maintain life. For example, under construction in Beldangi II is a temple. The construction of this temple is funded entirely by the community –

[53] Personal interview with Kavi R., Beldangi II camp. November 17, 2006.

no external funding or material assistance is provided from the agencies in the camps. Thus, income generation becomes important in providing for the more subjective needs of the refugee community.[54]

The need for an income and the means by which refugees go about working to develop a source of income generation in many cases appears take precedence over activism toward a solution. Money provides control over one's life, and the short term gratification is understandably more attractive to many refugees than the possible long term gratification that may result from activism. In many ways, participation in organizations not focused on daily needs is a luxury that some simply cannot afford in the given circumstances.

Yet another unmet need that may limit refugee participation is education. Earlier, the difficulty of funding education for children was discussed, and this is certainly an issue for children who are not able to continue their education to the degree that they would like. Additionally, however, little education is provided for refugees concerning their options for the future. A timely and instructive example can be found in the recent discussion of resettlement, especially in the United States. While many refugees are in favor of resettlement, few know what resettlement actually entails. Rajani laughingly described a woman in Beldangi II's perceptions about what life would be like in the US. She had heard that a food shortage in the US prompted the government to offer resettlement, and that after some time they would be tied up and fed to the hungry population.[55]

[54] Ibid.
[55] Personal interview with Rajani in Damak, December 2, 2006.

Irrational though this type of rhetoric sounds, it is this brand of rumor trading that shaped much perception in the camps of what is taking place in the outside world. Uncertainty about truth may play a role in limiting Bhutanese activism and promotion of various solutions. It is difficult to advocate for a position without full knowledge of what that position entails. Reliable information is localized in agencies and among refugees who have stronger connections outside the camps. One way to combat this ignorance, as was mentioned earlier, is to have agencies involve refugees more significantly in their day to day operations.

The challenges to refugee participation are numerous, but they are not insurmountable, as several examples demonstrate.

Bhutanese Activism

On October 8th,2006, *The Kathmandu Post* ran an article that, not for the first time, described refugees as "languishing" in the camps.[56] While it is certainly true that the last 16 years been increasingly difficult, as donor fatigue and resource depletion set in, not all refugees are taking their situation lying down. Several Bhutanese organizations as well as several agency-established and refugee run organizations, provide admirable examples of refugees who have taken the initiative to advocate for solutions to locally defined problems.

One such organization is the Bhutanese Refugee Children's Forum. The Children's Forum was established as a group called "Child to Child" by a group

[56] Post Report. "Resettlement plan in favor of Bhutanese king." *The Kathmandu Post* , October 8, 2006.

called Save the Children Foundation-UK (SCF). SCF later ended its involvement in the camps, but Child to Child continued on as the Children's Forum in 1997 and fell under the operation of LWF. The Children's Forum provides kids in the camps a chance to develop leadership skills and get involved in helping other kids. Neena K., a resident of Beldangi I, was one of the first members of the Children's Forum.[57] She recalls her participation in the Children's Forum as a good experience. As a member, she was able to attend a conference in Bangkok, Thailand for Children's Forum members.

Current Beldangi II Children's Forum member Narayan T. speaks articulately about the role of the Children's Forum in advocating for children's rights. In the October 2006 issue of "The Child Creation," a newspaper published monthly by the forum, a sidebar on the front page quotes article 7 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Forum is involved in conducting art and poetry competitions, putting together programs for various occasions and putting on educational programs to educate their peers about camp issues. One such "street drama" was performed in Beldangi II about girl trafficking in the camps.[58]

In Khudunabari camp, a small organization was formed just six months ago to lobby for the provision of specialized health services for victims of torture. The Bhutanese Torture Victim's Association (BTVA) recognized that torture victims in the camps had specialized needs socially, mentally, and medically. A

[57] Personal interview with Neena K, Beldangi I camp. November 27th, 2006.
[58] Girl trafficking, as well as prostitution, were said by several sources to be issues in the camps. A Children's Forum member from Beldangi I said that yearly, 16-17 girls are taken from the camps. Maiti Nepal has been active in working to bring back girls that have been trafficked over the Indian border.

position paper for the organization notes the presence of 152 torture victims in Khudunabari alone. The organization right now lacks funding, but is seeking to provide aid to one of the camps' most vulnerable groups.[59]

The Human Rights Organization of Bhutan (HUROB) was the only organization looking after refugees when they first arrived in Nepal. After 1993, with the arrival of UNHCR, HUROB left the camps and began doing campaign and advocacy work to lobby for human rights in Bhutan. Like the BRRRC, HUROB only advocates for repatriation as a solution to the refugee crisis. However, HUROB has no intention of acting as a voice for the refugee population as a whole. The patient leader of the organization, S.B. Subba, emphasizes that refugees should be able to make their own decisions about the future. He, however, and others involved in HUROB, have been involved for some time in peaceful protests for human rights in Bhutan. One such protest is the weekly Mechi Bridge protest. Composed of a changing group of residents from several camps, the sit-in at the Indian border is a call to India for increased involvement in promoting human rights in Bhutan.[60]

Perhaps the greatest strength of HUROB is the patience of its leader. Subba emphasized that they were not measuring the successes of their campaign on huge changes in Bhutan. Rather, Subba emphasizes that change is a slow and painful process. He also stresses the need for refugees to involve themselves as the masters of their own fate.

[59] Group interview with the founders of the BTVA, Khudunabari camp. November 23rd, 2006.
[60] Personal interview with S.B Subba, head of HUROB in Damak. November 19th, 2006.

Another fledgling organization has sown promise in more fully representing refugees. The Bhutanese Refugee Durable Solution Coordinating Committee, or the BRDSCC, was formed by a group of refugee in response to disillusionment with the refugee leaders. This group, in short, works to provide durable solutions to the refugee problem. Members of the group feel that focusing on a single platform, such as repatriation, is too limiting for this group of refugees. Spokesperson Hari Bangaley, who also serves as the Camp Secretary for Beldangi II, believes that a solution for every refugee can come from this committee. "If we stop," says Bangaley, "it will be unfortunate for those who cannot go, cannot speak."[61] The organization set up a resettlement rally in Beldangi II in November of 2006. This was the first rally of its kind, and *The Kathmandu Post* covered the rally in an article titled "Refugees seek support for third country resettlement."[62]

While the political advocacy activities of the BRDSCC provide a hopeful example of homegrown Bhutanese activism, equally impressive is the work of the women's desk of the organization. Rajani R., who heads the women's desk, has been working hard to promote women's involvement in the camps. One of the most important goals of Rajani's work is to create a camp information center where camp residents can come to find reliable information about the world outside the camps as well as developments in their situation.

Conclusions

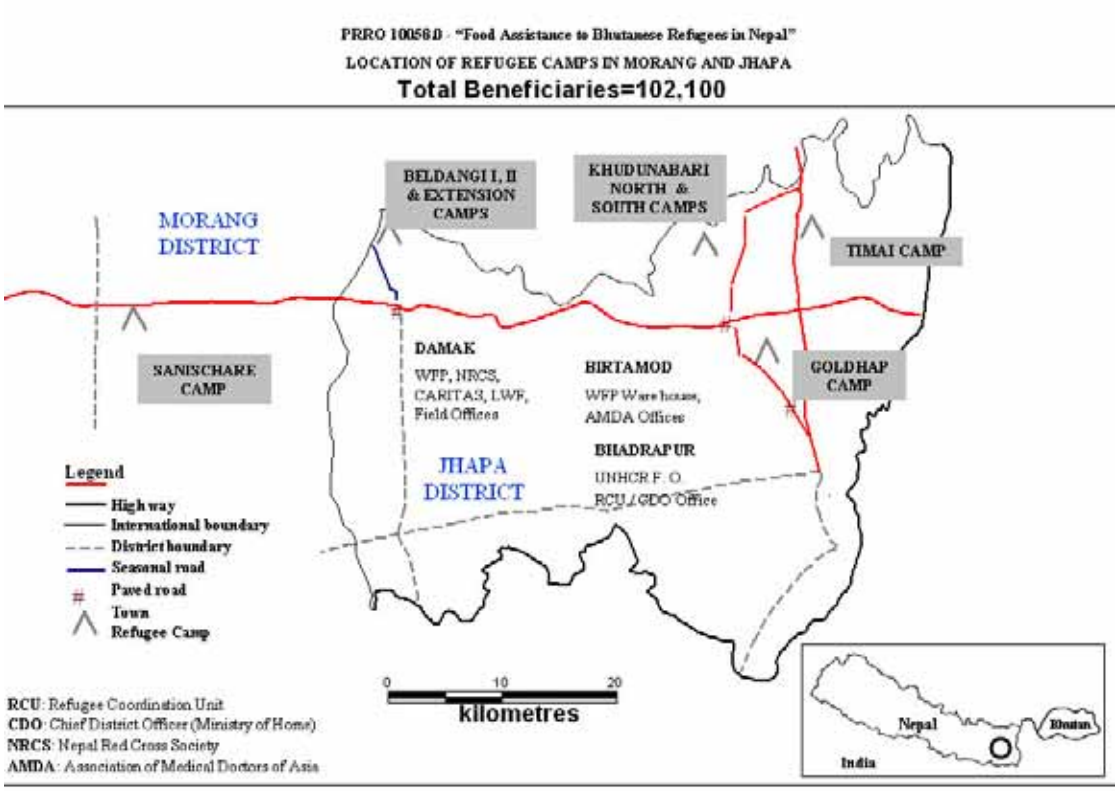
[61] Personal interview with Hari Bangaley, spokesperson of the BRDSCC in Damak. November 19th, 2006

[62] Post Report. "Refugees seek support for third-country resettlement." *The Kathmandu Post,* November 27, 2006.

The issue of agency in Nepal's Bhutanese refugee community is a very important one. While it is clear that a number of mechanisms on the agency and locals levels have combined to suppress refugee voices, it is also clear that refugees are trying to make their voices heard through a number of venues. Many of the recent local and proactive pushes to voice refugee needs as defined by the community are encouraging and provide hope for the future.

Action on this issue in the past has been painfully slow and tentative, and in the coming months, although there is serious hope for a solution to the refugee issue, it is necessary for refugees to continue taking an active role in their destiny. This issue of agency among marginalized groups is an important one, and as such further research into this subject is warranted. In the meantime, the recent renewal of interest in the issue brings hope for a speedy resolution. When asked what he wanted people to know about his situation, a man in Beldangi II thought for a moment and replied, "We are Bhutanese living in Nepal. And we don't want to be refugees anymore!" This, perhaps, is a statement that all refugees can agree on. Let us hope that agencies and refugees can work together to make this ideal a reality.

Appendix A: Location of Bhutanese refugee camps in southern Nepal

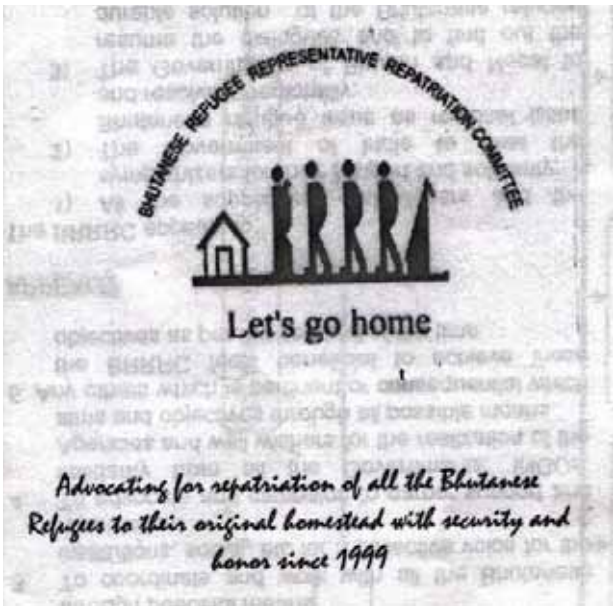


Source: World Food Programme website: http://www.wfp.org.no/prm
Accessed December 8, 2006

Appendix B: Activism in a variety of forms

Protestors at the Mechi Bridge on the India-Nepal border. This sit-in is sponsored by HUROB and occurs weekly. (Photographed November 24, 2006)

Residents of Beldangi II camp at the first ever rally for third country resettlement. (Photographed



The cover of a brochure of the BRRRC advocating its platform of repatriation.

A sign in Beldangi II (ext.) explaining how AIDS is spread. A new addition to the camps sponsored by the World Food Programme.

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(note: all interviews cited in the body of the text)